

* Valerie Jo Bradley
* Black Women Organized for Action
* by phone, 8 October 1997

K: The first question I wanted to ask you was how long you participated in Black Women Organized for Action?

Valerie Jo Bradley: From the time it was organized until the time I moved away from San Francisco, which was in June of 1977.

K: Let's see. The group started about '76---

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, no.

K: '73.

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, it had been organized about '72 or '73, yeah.

K: Okay, and do you still consider the group to still be in existence?

Valerie Jo Bradley: No.

K: Okay, well, 'cause Dr.--Ms. Hernandez has her list of people that she says who are still active. And she said that sometimes if people see some sort of issue that comes up that they think should be addressed, they'll send out something on BWOA stationary.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Oh, I see. Well, I'm not in the Bay Area and I've been here for twenty years.

K: So how did you come to be involved with BWOA?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, let me just start from the beginning. I was an associate editor at *Jet* magazine in Chicago and when Aileen Hernandez was named the second president of the National Organization of [sic] Women and the first Black American to be in a position like that, I did a cover story [date of issue?] on her when she came to Chicago. And I was quite impressed with her as a person and actually she became my mentor, so that when I got a fellowship for graduate school to the University of California- Berkeley, one of the first persons I called when I got to the Bay Area was Aileen. And---

K: Do you remember what year that was?

Valerie Jo Bradley: 1970. And so I'd been a working journalist and not really involved in the feminist movement, but knew a lot about it because I'd covered it as a journalist or covered people who were feminists---black feminist or whatever. And I was living in the East Bay because I was at UC-Berkeley. So the first group that was really organized was Black Women Organized for Political Action---BWOPA ["Ba-wop-a"]. That's the way we called it [laughter]. And this group supposedly had the same goals that eventually BWOA had, but what I found was they seemed to exist primarily to hold fundraisers for male candidates [gender-parallel, auxiliary?], to re-elect male incumbents and did not seem to really be encouraging women to get involved in a more active way in the political process---by running for office, anyway, doing the grunt work. And they grew out of the "Dames for Dellums" when Dellums first ran for Congress. See, I'm going way back right [laughter]? When Dellums first ran for Congress a group of Black women got together to raise money for Dellums called "Dames for Dellums" and it kind of grew into BWOPA. Okay?

K: Okay.

Valerie Jo Bradley: And I think it involved women from both the East Bay and the West Bay because, you know, it's a close community. Just a bridge away. And all of a sudden BWOA was formed because I think

other women felt like I felt; that we needed to be dealing with women's issues and encouraging women to run for political office and be appointed to boards and commissions and to learn more about the political process so that they could function on those levels. And, so, I left BWOA---by that time I was out of graduate school and I think I was about to---I was working in San Francisco. And, so, I started being involved in BWOA. I think I remember the initial meetings and whatever. When we started organizing it was much smaller than it eventually became, which was a much larger organization.

K: So do you---was Black Women Organized for Political Action sort of your more previous activism or were you involved in other civil rights or feminist things before that.

Valerie Jo Bradley: I was involved in civil rights kinds of activities, but not feminist activities, but there were feminist issues in some of the civil rights activities. Like, I had been involved on the periphery of SNNC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and there were issues about the role of women in the organization. And I had been involved, and continued to be involved, in Southern African support work. And there were always issues [mic fell off] who was going to be the spokesperson and who---you know, there were always issues 'cause this was the '70s, okay? The end of the '60s, '70s was this whole move around Black consciousness and cultural nationalism that the role of the Black woman was to be supportive to her man and so she should be some steps back and let him move forward and lead [laughter].

K: Babies for the revolution.

Valerie Jo Bradley: That was one thought, you know what I mean? And, frankly, I had been involved while I was in graduate school in a theatre group which was organized by a playwright named "Marvin X," who was popular during the time. And he was Muslim, but he was Summi Muslim. He was not in the Nation of Islam. [breaks for another call] And it was, like, ritual theatre, which was actually started by Barbara Ann Teer here in New York. And, so, he brought it to the Bay Area 'cause he had done a stint in New York and so I was in that theatre because I was---it was an avocation, dancing and acting while I was in grad school and whatever.

So I decided to, at that point, embrace Islam and one of the reasons why I didn't stay in it was because I didn't like how it was being practiced and the sexism that was involved. You know, women separated for prayer and the subservient role that women had to play in this particular version of Islam and so I very quickly moved out of that. Okay? But it was a period when there were definitely that strain of thought about the role of Black women, but then increasingly there were Black women in the movement who were saying, "No, that's not my role. I think and I have ideas and I can do things just as well." In fact there were those of us who were in the movement who said, "If they didn't have us, there wouldn't be a movement."

So there was a lot of dialogue and struggle around those issues so that when white feminists got more organized into a new kind of organization called the National Organization of Women and were holding demonstrations and burning bras and whatever, there was a lot of dialogue and conversation about where the black woman fit in that.

K: Okay, great. Do you recall what role you played in the BWOA? I know you were involved with the newsletter, but were you ever one of the coordinators?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yes, I was one of the coordinators. There were three of us at the time: Eve Reingold and Alma Jackson.

K: Okay, those are familiar names.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Eve, I think, is in Seattle now and Alma is still in the Bay Area. I guess Aileen gave you their names?

K: Yes, they might be on the list.

Valerie Jo Bradley: So, I was an early coordinator. I was chair of the media committee and I also did fundraising, fundraisers as well as helped organize a couple of our conferences that we held. I was very involved. I was very active.

K: Right. So you got to play a lot of different roles.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah and I was, like, the second newsletter editor.

K: Do you feel like that gave you a lot of experience with different aspects of organizing?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah, well, I think I was always an organizer, but I think it certainly helped me hone my skills for organizing. I think what it did was help define what I basically do as a public relations consultant now and I definitely went into public relations/communications, as the Director of Public Relations for the United Way of the Bay Area while a member of BWOA.

K: And how do you feel like the---having different coordinators worked for the organization?

Valerie Jo Bradley: I thought it was great because it was a great training ground. There's one woman I stay in touch with who's like, I call my "California Mother" because she's my mother's age, but, you know, we relate to each other as peers. Flora---Flora---god, what---

K: Was she in BWOA?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah.

K: Flora Gilford?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah, Flora Gilford. And Flora had been, you know, had raised her children and worked at the Veteran's Administration as a director or purchasing and whatever. But she said that she really felt intimidated about being in a leadership position or whatever until she got in BWOA and got so involved. She was a coordinator at one point. And it gave her a lot of experiences. I mean, Flora is just a dynamo now. She does all kinds of things now. And she did then. I saw her grow. You know, I saw a lot of women grow who might not have done something had they not been encouraged in an organization like BWOA.

K: So it wasn't just for the benefit of the group, but people got something out of it personally?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, that was the purpose. That's how it was structured. It was structured to develop women; to get you ready to run for office and to ^{ably} hold office and to sit on commissions and boards and know the political process and organize.

K: That's great because with a lot of groups during that time, that sort of organizational structure didn't work. You had a lot of problems with people being perceived as stars of the organization, so I'm finding that's where BWOA really stands out.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Right. How many other people have you interviewed?

K: I've interviewed Aileen Hernandez and I've interviewed people from other organizations, like the National Black Feminist Organization, Third World Women's Alliance, and trying to interview people from the Combahee River Collective. About thirteen interviews.

Valerie Jo Bradley: I see. So this is the second one for BWOA.

K: Yeah. Right.

Valerie Jo Bradley: I see. Yeah, I think it was unique in that regard because there really was no one "star" of the organization. There were people who worked harder than other people in the organization, but there was a larger number of us, so that the burden of things didn't fall on just three or four, but maybe, like, twelve or fifteen. You know, which is, I think, a nice pool.

K: So you think that was, like, the core activist part of the group? Twelve to fifteen people?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah, possibly. Maybe at sometimes twenty, but on many occasions women would rise to the occasion. You know what I mean?

K: Right. Probably depending on the event.

Valerie Jo Bradley: On the issue. It depended on your comfort level with what you were dealing with.

K: Okay, do you recall any particular arguments or discussions that the group had internally?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, a group of corporate Buppies [Black Urban Professionals] joined [laughter]. We didn't call them that then. One is a very close friend of mine now in corporate marketing and stuff like that. She was a marketing director with Citibank and she now has her own consulting firm in Japan. She and her group of friends wanted---it seemed like more inclusion. But they weren't being excluded, yet, they weren't doing the work.

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K: So they wanted more inclusion---

Valerie Jo Bradley: They said they did.

K: ---for themselves.

Valerie Jo Bradley: But they were, like, newer-comers. I think they were more accustomed, rather than to a community-based kind of initiative to a more corporate structure and maybe it was more alien to them. But we struggled with it and the organization did not break up as a result, you know what I mean? We worked it out. They did get involved, those that wanted to be more involved, but they had to understand that with responsibility---I mean, with leadership comes responsibility.

K: So it was more of the structure they had a problem, not with any of the activities that BWOA did?

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, not with the activities, but---

K: They wanted more hierarchy.

K: Do you recall any particular events that stand out for you that BWOA participated in or issues?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, there were a number of them. One that I was instrumental in spearheading was, in the media committee, was monitoring television for the roles that---to check the roles of black women and programs. *Good Times* was particularly offensive to us. Florida, you know, never had a job [the mother on the show; I thought she was a stay-at-home mom/housewife? Antithetical to the lives of real black women?]. Thelma was bright but she never was given much dialogue. And they had that idiot, fool JJ doing all that---you know, whatever. So we wrote Norman Lear to complain about it and to give him our statistics on our monitoring after monitoring it from somewhere between six and nine months. And Norman Lear responded back and invited us to see the operation, meet with the writers. He even asked us to identify Black women writers who could bring that sensitivity. He agreed that perhaps he had not paid much attention. So, as a result, Thelma's role expanded and Florida got a job.

K: Oh, wow.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Now I don't know if we did that single handedly, but we certainly did stay on it and Norman Lear did respond.

K: Did you have that kinds of success with other tv shows or issues?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, I think that *Good Times* was the only one that we did contact the producer directly because we had a lot of projects and we all were holding down full-time jobs ourselves. We did major Black women conferences, in which we had major speakers. I remember one year it was during the--who was president then? I guess it was Nixon. Gloria Tute [?] was high up in HUD. I think she was the undersecretary for HUD or something and she came and spoke. It was quite a---it was a groundbreaking conference of that type 'cause it was about housing, welfare reform,---let's see---jobs. You know, non-traditional jobs? And parenting---well, you know, day care things like that. Those kinds of issues and whatever. And probably was the first of its kind to be sponsored by an organization of Black women.

K: Do you feel like you had participation from a broad cross-section of Black women?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Definitely. We had definitely reached out to women in the Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and they were there *en masse*. And with blue-collar working women, as well as professional women. And our organization was basically made up---had that kinds of diversity in its membership---as well as students.

K: And in your opinion did your organization espouse any particular ideology?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, we were supposed to be non-partisan, right?

K: Uh-huh.

Valerie Jo Bradley: And, basically, we were because there were some women in the organization who were Republican. Our thing was to get women ready, no matter what the administration or the party, to be a part of the process.

K: Do you recall if the organization had tax-exempt status?

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, we didn't. We never got there. That's one of the things the "corporate women" talked about, okay? But then they never put it together.

K: I see. So---

Valerie Jo Bradley: We said, "It's fine. Do it."

K: But they didn't do it [laughter].

Valerie Jo Bradley: [laughter] Right.

K: How do you think BWOA was viewed by other organizations.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, you know, we were involved in coalitions with a lot of white feminist organizations, as well as with Black men's organizations, and a few other Black women's organizations [which?], but primarily it was other feminist organizations. Like we were involved in organizing the Feminist Federal Credit Union. I was one of the planners who represented BWOA in that whole planning process. It took us about a year and a half to get it together. I was there primarily to make sure that low-income African American women weren't discriminated against on the basis of criteria that were used for the mainstream community, which was the same thing that locks us out anyway. So I made sure that those considerations were part of the thinking when we looked at lending. We---like issues like the ERA, worked with other feminist organizations, like NOW and the National Women's Political Caucus. And lesbians organizations in the San Francisco-Bay Area. I'm trying to think of some of the other issues. There were

lots of issues, you know, that when---if they were common issues that we were in agreement with people, we would work with them, but it didn't mean that we were forever wedded to them.

K: Right. So more like single-issue organizing around things?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Right. No, we weren't a single-issue group.

K: I want to go back to the credit union for a second. You said it took a year and a half to organize. Do you recall how long it lasted?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, see, it didn't start until shortly before I was moving to New York. So I'm not aware of how long it lasted, but it certainly did get off the ground.

K: Do you recall what other organizations were involved?

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, I can't remember those organizations. I know there were some lesbian organizations and I don't recall that there were any Latinas in the group. But I don't remember the names of those groups at all.

K: Okay.

Valerie Jo Bradley: So, BWOPA was competitive with us.

K: So they were still---

Valerie Jo Bradley: They still exist. I think they still organize in the East Bay. They've got some elected women now to the legislature, like, I think Desi Jones at least has run for office and some other women. I think they got a little more concerned about women, certainly after I moved away from the Bay Area, than they were when I was living there.

K: So do you mean competitive---in what sense do you mean competitive?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, there was always like a friendly competition. "Well, you know, BWOPA's doing this. Well, BWOA's doing that." I think for some of the original members of BWOPA---because I was one of the organizing members of BWOPA, you know?

K: Okay. Right.

Valerie Jo Bradley: And I had strong ties in the East Bay even after I moved to San Francisco to the West Bay. So I was always over there for social functions and whatever, so I certainly would always be kept abreast of what BWOPA was doing. We always invited each other to our events. But there was, like, a friendly competition. It wasn't ugly. It wasn't bitchy. You know what I mean? We supported each other on events and issues.

Now I remember another event that we did. There was a woman named Mary Ellen Pleasant, "Mammy" Pleasant as some people call her, in history.

K: I think I read about her in some literature.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, her operation was in San Francisco and she was an incredible woman whose history has been obliterated in terms of her impact on helping San Francisco to grow. She was a major investor in the Bank of California. So there are some eucalyptus trees that are still standing in San Francisco because BWOA saved them from being torn down---from being chopped down because that's the only living legacy of the fact that Mary Ellen Pleasant was on this earth in San Francisco. They were in front of what used to be her mansion, which when she died, she died in abject poverty. But those trees are

still there that she planted. We organized a campaign to save those trees and so they were made a part of the park landmarks and have been preserved.

K: So there's a plaque or something there?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah.

K: Do you know where that is off-hand?

Valerie Jo Bradley: I'd have to look in my records or you might have to ask Aileen because she's probably got every newsletter there is, right?

K: Yeah.

Valerie Jo Bradley: 'Cause she's that organized.

K: Yeah, she sent me a lot of great material. So what do you think BWOA accomplished? And that's either on a personal level or on a political level?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Well, on a political level, a number of women have certainly moved into areas that they might not have had they not got that kind of training in BWOA. For example, there is Barbara Lee, who is a state senator who had been an assemblyperson, who is now a state senator and had a very hard race, but who won. She was very involved in BWOA. There are women who are in business—I'm just trying to remember the East Bay women and where they're at today. I know there's a lot more who are, say for example, elected officials or have been elected officials and I just can't recall who they are now. I'm trying to think. But you know what I can do? I can think about that and then send that to you.

K: Sure, you can email me with anything you think of afterwards.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Right, right. But, let's see, on a personal level? I think I certainly met a lot of women who I have a tremendous amount of respect for and, as a result of that, have lasting friendships with and who I network with even today about things that are happening as it relates to the race or to women. Because, see, our sole reason for existing was not just on a feminist agenda, but there was a struggle when we decided at one point we needed to develop a mission statement. And it was about being involved in issues that were of concern to the Black community and to women. Black women.

K: That's what the struggle was over?

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, but we put that in our mission statement to distinguish us from just being solely feminist. Because at the time there was also a time about just being clearly feminist and that it meant you had sold out to the race because it's—there still is so many problems that we struggle with as a race, as well, as our gender struggles. And often, as Black women, we don't know if we're being discriminated against because we're Black or because we're women or because of both.

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K: Right. Exactly.

Valerie Jo Bradley: And so the two go hand-in-hand and are inseparable.

K: Okay, so you felt like you had to include both of those in the statement to be clear.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Right. And also to make it easier to work with Black men, who had very visceral reactions to the word "feminist".

K: What kind of reactions do you recall to the organization?

Valerie Jo Bradley: I think they had a respect for us, though I think that sometimes I think they could tease and say, you know, like, "You gonna take over the world" or "It's enough that we're pushed back by white men. Now Black women want to take over, too." That kind of thing.

K: So, you moved away from the Bay Area to New York, so you didn't really leave the organization?

Valerie Jo Bradley: No, and, in fact, I kept getting my newsletters. I kept paying my dues. Most people did. There was a woman, Cynthia Eddings, who moved before I did and came to *Essence*, and she kept her news---she had been the newsletter editor at one time, too. She kept getting her newsletters and paying her dues. And I would imagine Eve did the same thing when she moved to Seattle. A lot of people did the same thing. Once BWOA, always BWOA.

We also do, you know, poetry. I think I expanded my poetry as a result of meeting some sisters in the organization who were also writers, like, a woman named Ahimsa, who is a medical doctor now. Ahimsa. And she wrote beautiful poetry. Also we would do social gatherings for BWOA in which we would do our poetry or we would feature our poetry in the newsletter. We finally got published in some anthologies. You know, mainstream anthologies on poetry and stuff. So that certainly was developed by associating with women in the organization. I haven't written poetry really, almost, since then---since living in San Francisco. But I did a lot. I wrote a lot while I was there and I think it was encouraged by my associations with women in BWOA and other members in BWOA who appreciated it and encouraged it. You know, with the readings and things like that, they would let you know they liked it or whatever.

K: So why do you think the organization doesn't exist anymore.

Valerie Jo Bradley: I don't know I wasn't there. But, you know, organizations are dynamic and things change. And situations change, people's needs change, their responsibilities change, so that probably had a lot to do with it, you know? Why did Aileen think it?

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K: Well, but she still says it exists so---not in the sense that people are still meeting and everything, but as far as using it as a tool now to respond to certain issues. So that's something I have to figure out, I guess. But she also mentioned just that people got tired. I think she used the word "meeting'd out." They were kind of exhausted so it's much easier to do it on a more abstract level than it is to actually get together and meet. But she said some of the same things about the accomplishments as far as spreading out the leadership and developing those skills in women.

I think that's about it. You mentioned that you have photographs.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yeah, I have photographs from when we did that tree thing. We had a demonstration at the tree. I might have some other things, too. I'll look and see. I think maybe---we hosted the media committee. Well, we got put on the State Department---I don't know if you're aware of this that the State Department brings foreign visitors in from all over the world all the time and they take them all around the country to meet with different kinds of people. And especially then, and I think even now sometimes, they---when they have African visitors, they don't reach out to leadership or women who have---who are involved in the same kinds of things that these other women are involved in, in the black community---to expose them to Black people and whatever.

I found out that a group of media women from Africa were coming---well, there were a group of women in media were coming through the auspices of the State Department and I understood that there were a number of women from Africa who were coming. Some of them were newspaper editors, producers of radio, commentators on radio, magazine editors, etc. And that was very exciting to me and I thought that they should also have an opportunity to meet Black women in media in the San Francisco/Bay Area. So I called up the contact at the State Department in San Francisco and they said, "Well, they won't have time to meet with you." I mean, it was just like I was brushed off. So then I really then pursued it. So they said "They'll have a little time during whatever." I said, "We want to host a reception for them and I think this is very important." We really pushed it. We got very pushy. We were like that. And so these women---we picked them up and we had a wonderful time. They were from Nigeria, Ghana, Mali, Guinea, and I'm



trying to think. I think Zaire, Liberia, a number of countries, right? And really bright, dynamic women, and they said---we fixed soul food, you know what I mean? Our food and whatever. And it was a wonderful cultural exchange because they said, number one, they'd been eating this bland white food [laughter] and they said, "They even took us to Washington D.C. and we didn't even meet with any African Americans." And, you know, that's chocolate city! And they said, "All of these sessions have been so boring. It's been nice to see newspaper operations here and television operations there and whatever, but we are so happy to be with our sisters!"

K: That's excellent.

Valerie Jo Bradley: And it was---as a result of that---they had several other days left in San Francisco. They didn't go on the rest of the itinerary. We paired off with all of the different women---all of the different ones of us, who were media people. They wanted to know where to go to shop and get wigs [laughter] and they wanted to get clothes and toys for their children and none of that was on the itinerary for them and whatever. We took 'em to discos, to church. Some of those women I am still in contact with now. One woman from Nigeria was head of a radio station in Eboten [?] and anytime someone she knew from Nigeria was traveling to Nigeria, she always sends me a gift. And another woman in Senegal, I always see her when I go to Senegal. I think Cameroon, too. There was a Cameroonian woman that I stayed in contact a lot---with a lot. We had women in the organization who spoke fluent French for the French speakers. They loved it. It was, like, we were together. We talked about common issues that we shared about working in media and it was just like a wonderful exchange. And so as a result of that, we got on the State Department's list to host women from the Third World 'cause it wasn't just---we did things with Arab women. I remember hanging out with a Kuwaiti journalist and it was really interesting to hear about her life in Kuwait, which is so repressive to women, but to also know that there are women who are journalists in Kuwait. And in Argentina and, you know---we were on the list.

K: That's great. So you did them a favor, really.

Valerie Jo Bradley: That's right. Absolutely. We opened it up.

K: And so you have pictures from that also?

Valerie Jo Bradley: Yes, I think so. At least some newspaper articles.

K: [babbling about contacting her at a future date to see what she has to copy materials]

Valerie Jo Bradley: Oh, I forgot to tell you: we had a skills bank. We had a job bank. I think you saw that in the newsletter, right, when jobs opening were available for women and whatever. There were a lot of services we offered. There were a lot of benefits women got from being a part of the organization.

K: Thanks [gaps in chronology, BWOPA].

Valerie Jo Bradley: We were non-partisan, although probably the majority of us were Democrats. But like I said, there were some Republican women and were even some independent women. Independent Party, you know? And there were women who were Marxists and communists who were part of the organization. We did things with the Panther party.

K: It's very widespread.

Valerie Jo Bradley: Right. We got involved in common issues that were in our interest with the Panther Party, the communists, Angela Davis. You know, Angela Davis was living there then. She was a good friend of mine. And also with Marxists, especially around Southern African support work. So we had, like, radical women, liberal women, conservative, housewives, business, corporate types, lawyers, women on welfare, students, wealthy women, and poor women. It was, like, you know, a very diverse organization.

K: Well, if you think of anything else email me. [Okay to email her with follow-up.]